



GUARD RAILS

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Gasoline, cedar, snow—the smells snap me back into consciousness.

The cold chases down my throat.

My back pressed against my seat like an astronaut launching toward the stars in a crumpled capsule, I list to the right against my seatbelt. The steering wheel pins the high bump of my belly. Snow speckles the windshield between the steady whir-thud of the wipers. The engine ticks, and steam hisses from the crack along the hood. A splintered branch skewers the passenger window, ending just inches from my face. Its solid trunk fills the view on that side. Tiny glass pebbles fall from my hair when I shift my gaze. Other branches pierce the car at odd angles along the right side.

Pain gnaws at my arm when I shove my door. I push harder, fighting gravity and gnarled metal before relenting.

My fingers wrestle into a pocket. I ease my phone out, catching a glimpse in the screen's reflection. Fading yellow bruises. New scuffs. Blood.

When the screen lights, I expel a breath. My eyes fill, and then I stare, rechecking the signal. I shake my head and lift the phone. Nausea undulates. The phone clatters free as I refocus.

Above, light sweeps the darkness and settles. Quintin's truck glides to a stop. My heart cannons into my aching ribs. The bang of his door carries down the distant swath I plowed.

My eyes cut to the rear seat and back. Quintin leans over the broken guard rail, crowbar clasped in his gloved hand, staring down at the wreckage around me. I swear his eyes lock with mine. He throws a leg over the railing and starts easing his way down the slope.

A low whimper spills from me. I renew the fight against my metal cage. I thrash and groan until my shaking fingers discover and unclip my seatbelt. I clamber-fall down into the back seat before squirming my way around branches toward the trunk.

Through the shattered rear window, I look back. Quintin is halfway down the slope. He sinks into the drifts up to his knees. His arms flail, and then he buries the crowbar like an icepick, breaking his slide.

My parka catches on the last branch.

Quintin slides closer.

I wriggle out of the coat and squeeze sideways between the empty window and ragged branch.

Quintin starts across the snowy impact craters my car made in its careening roll into the treetops.

Snow needles my face as I half drop, half slide down the car trunk. I buckle as I hit the ground, sinking into icy fuel-contaminated slush. My feet pedal and skid for purchase.

I turn and wade-run deeper into the woods through the snow. Arms wide, I pitch and sway, snagging against barren twigs and deadfall branches while sinking through the drifts.

I keep twisting back to check. Quintin doesn't rush. He navigates my narrow wake, constantly calling after me. I forge on, ignoring his pleas.

Ahead, the trees yield to open sky. My lungs burn, and my skin tightens against the whipping wind.

I gasp as the ground falls away to a dizzying ravine. My arms windmill. I wobble. Far below, flecks of white water cap the steel thread of a river.

I scan left and right, powder-mouthed.

Behind me snow crushes underfoot. My stomach churns as I spin to face him.

Quintin glowers. His fingers tighten around the crowbar.

I retreat another shuffled step. Stones trickle away under my boot heel. The wind scours my hair across my sight as silent tears freeze on my cheeks.

Teetering, I weigh the fall before meeting his gaze.

"Angela, stop it." With a slow shake of his head, he lowers the crowbar and extends his hand. His lips curl. "You lost control. Slid off the road."

"That's not what happened," I whisper. Blood whooshes in my ears like an ultrasound echo of that tiniest heartbeat. I cradle my stretched belly.

His stare bores into me, pinning me down. He reaches for me. "Please," he says. "Come back with me."

I sink to my knees. Then my hands.

A single held breath stops time.

My palm closes around a loose rock.

A trace of warmth crosses my cheek. His breath. His face leans in, close enough above his offered hand. My cry is guttural, primal, instant. I hurl my weighted fist, the rock cold and sharp, buried in my palm. It connects, the sound like a branch snapping. Quintin drops sideways past me. The crowbar clangs as it falls free, striking and bouncing over the ledge.

I recoil. My fingers spread in the snow and ice. I stagger to my feet. Quintin clamps my ankle. I scream. He stumbles up and steps toward me. I slip, pitching forward. My face strikes the ground. My lip splits against my teeth as I flail. My boot crunches into something solid. His fingers clasp my calf. I thrash and twist, crying too hard to see. Another wild kick—a howl—my anchor is gone.

Quintin is gone.

I tremble and pant, lying curled on the ground. The air is still, feathered with falling snow. I push up and lean on my hip, propping myself on my arm. One frozen hand cups my round belly. The hand I'm leaning on still clutches the rock. I stare at the smear of dark red on its cold grey planes. Then I look across the monochrome landscape beyond the ravine. An indifferent sky sends fat snowflakes pinwheeling into my hair and face.

I turn my numb gaze back toward the woods. A faint flicker of distant blue strobes through the darkened trunks. I pitch the bloodied rock over the edge and stand.